

## **Chapter Twelve – Subsection 8: Fireside Interlude — On Criticism, Negative Energy, and the Weight of Words**

**By Aynalem Adugna**  
**Research Scientist, State of California**

My children, and the children of Ethiopians scattered across America, Europe, and Australia—pull your chairs closer to the fire and listen with both ears open. I am not here to flatter you or to entertain your timelines. I am here to demand something from you. Your generation has the education, freedom, and bandwidth our parents could not imagine. With that comes a heavier judgment: what did you build, and what did you break? What did your words do in the real world? Did they open a school—or close one? Did they move food and medicine—or barricade them behind slogans?

Let me be as clear as the crack of eucalyptus in a dry flame: commentary is not contribution. Indignation is not service. Tweets are not institutions. A livestream is not a bridge, a hospital, or a school. If you have never governed a kebele, never shown up at dawn to reconcile feuding neighbors, never kept weekly ledger books for a community fund, never planted a single tree or cleaned a clogged drainage ditch, then be humble when you pass judgment on those who attempt the hard work of governing. The internet has conditioned many to confuse performance with competence. Ethiopia cannot be governed by performances.

I say this because I carry long years of public service—in classrooms and offices, in datasets and dirt roads. I have watched how rumor becomes tension, how tension becomes boycott, how boycott becomes blockade, and how blockade becomes hunger. I have measured hunger in the frightened eyes of girls who should have been in school. In the arithmetic of suffering, every reckless word has a price.

When I turn on diaspora broadcasts, I hear names that command audiences: Jawar Mohammed at OMN and beyond; Mesay Mekonnen in Anchor Media and Ethio 360 circles; Lidetu Ayalew, the prolific political commentator whose voice carries far from the safety of the United States. They are public

figures with platforms. But here is my rebuke: too often the headlines they amplify sound like thunder and deliver no rain. Too often the breathless talk of “victories”—Fano here, OLF there—evaporates the moment it is tested against the market and the classroom. My test is simple: can a mother buy salt today? can a child walk to school tomorrow? If the answer is no, your “victory” is a rumor, not a result.

I am not asking anyone to be silent. I am asking you to be accountable. Verify before you amplify. If you do not have verified facts, say so. If you are speaking opinion, label it as such. And if you are raising the temperature of the room, tell us what food you have brought for those who will go hungry when the room catches fire.

To those who celebrate the gun as a shortcut to justice, let me remind you: the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are piled high with the wreckage of movements that thought violence would deliver sustainable change. The First World War did not secure a stable Europe; it sowed the grief that birthed the Second. Liberation by barrel, from Algeria to Angola to Afghanistan, often bought flags without building institutions. In our lifetime, the TPLF’s military “victory” in 1991—achieved with allies and tremendous sacrifice—did not mature into an inclusive, stable order. By April 2018 a new political arrangement had arrived, and by November 2020 a catastrophic war detonated; by November 2022, there was paper signed in Pretoria after immeasurable loss. If this is victory, it is a pyrrhic one that mothers and teachers cannot afford.

Some will protest: “But what of dignity? What of self-defense?” Dignity requires discernment. Self-defense, if it truly is defense, must be tethered to the defense of life—especially the life of the civilian you do not know. If your rhetoric hardens the arteries of commerce so that salt cannot move and mothers die in childbirth, you are not defending anyone. You are merely moving the line on a map while moving the poor closer to the grave. I will not applaud you for that.

Diaspora voices, I am speaking to you with the urgency of a father who has buried a brother and looked for another in barracks and borders. If you are

counseling the young in Amhara or Oromia to shun dialogue, to reject even the possibility of talks with a government you disdain, then say the following aloud and sign your name beneath it: “I accept responsibility for every classroom kept closed, every clinic without oxygen, every harvest left to rot while I entertained my audience.” This is the price of careless speech in a hungry country.

Let us talk about Fano and OLF. Both words have histories, martyrs, songs. I know that. But I measure movements not by anthem or emblem; I measure them by outcomes for civilians. The truest ledger is this: did children return to school? did prices come down? did elders sleep without fear? did traders cross checkpoints without being shaken for bribes? If your answer is no, then your supposed “breakthroughs” are simply better theater. The people do not need theater. They need bread, schoolbooks, fuel, medicine, safety.

My rebuke is pointed because I have given my life to the slow work—building evidence, mapping inequities, solving problems no camera crew cares to film. I will not romanticize the grind; it is exhausting. But progress does not come from viral monologues. It comes from stubbornly unglamorous work: reopening a clinic one oxygen concentrator at a time; negotiating a corridor so that trucks carrying exercise books reach a woreda; training young enumerators to count births and deaths accurately so we know where to intervene. This is not “content.” It is nation-building.

Jawar, Mesay, Lidetu—this admonition is addressed to you by name because names must learn to carry the weight of their echoes. Use your platforms to urge dialogue, not to inflate phantom gains. Stop valorizing stalemate. Frame compromise not as surrender but as a victory for the child whose school reopens and the mother who reaches a midwife. If you must broadcast, broadcast checklists of what would tangibly ease suffering this week: corridors for food and fuel; amnesties for students; demobilization that prioritizes getting boys back into classrooms; civil-service hiring that rewards merit across languages and regions.

To the diaspora who forward every clip—ask yourself three questions before you share. First: Do I know this to be true beyond rumor? Second: Will

sharing this reduce suffering—or merely raise my adrenaline? Third: What will I do, in the real world, after I click send? If your answers are “no,” “no,” and “nothing,” close the app and pick up a phone to mentor a young person, wire money to rebuild a classroom, or book a flight to volunteer in a regional hospital. Your conscience will sleep better; so will someone else’s child.

Let us be explicit about the path of the last decades. In 1991, one coalition seized the capital and reconfigured the state. A generation later, in April 2018, a different leadership took the helm; by November 2020, a new war erupted; by November 2022, a truce was signed in Pretoria after staggering losses. What changed for the market woman counting coins at dusk? What changed for the student guarding a tattered notebook? If the answer is “not enough,” then understand why I am severe. I am severe because time is not a renewable resource. Every year we lose to stalemate is a cohort of children whose skills will never compound.

Now I want you to imagine the Ethiopia you claim to love. Picture her as a girl, thirteen years old, in a district where the school has been closed for months. She can recite multiplication tables she learned two grades ago. She can carry a twenty-liter jerrican of water uphill without stopping. She has started hearing proposals of marriage. She has also started hearing your broadcasts in the background while her uncle fixes a radio on a rickety shelf. Your voice tells her that victory is near. Tomorrow, you say, everything will change. But the radio cannot print exam papers, and promises do not rehire teachers. She needs you to stop promising and start building.

I do not romanticize governments. I have criticized every one I have known—from the Derg’s cruelties to post-1991 manipulations to the missteps and overreaches of the present. But I also refuse the lie that stalemate is strategy. Seat people at a table. Make ugly compromises. Save lives now, and argue about flags later. You cannot eat a flag. You cannot heat a clinic with a flag. The flag will be worth more when the children it covers are literate and alive.

Here is my compact with you for the next fifty years. Keep a ledger of your contribution, not your outrage. Tally trees planted, classrooms supplied,

students mentored, clinics stocked, bridges repaired, scholarships funded. Tally reconciliations brokered between estranged cousins, between neighbors, between villages. Tally hours spent in Ethiopian languages you did not grow up speaking—Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya—practicing humility across lines your parents once warned you not to cross. Tally acts that make life easier for strangers.

And one more discipline: before you publish anything incendiary, call one teacher in Ethiopia, one nurse, one small shopkeeper, and ask them, “Will this help you by next week?” If they say no, swallow your headline and do something useful instead. Sometimes the bravest sentence is the one you do not post.

I will end with a hard benediction. To every public voice in the diaspora—Jawar, Mesay, Lidetu, and all your peers—may your words be weighted by the lives they touch. If your broadcast closes a school, you share the debt. If your broadcast opens a clinic, you share the blessing. If your analysis deepens trenches, you share the blame. If your analysis builds a bridge, you share the honor. The arithmetic is simple. Choose the work that multiplies life.

I did not get a chance to bury a brother who died in Tigray and spent years searching for another through barracks and rumors. I will not bless any project that sends more families into that wilderness of grief. The only victory I recognize is the quiet reappearance of ordinary life: the market noise at dawn, the school bell at eight, the ambulance siren cutting through a Saturday rain. Everything else is theater. We are out of time for theater.

So, put away your adrenaline. Roll up your sleeves. Reconcile. Rebuild. Reopen. Plant and plan. Learn and teach. And whenever a man with a microphone promises you glory by Monday, ask him the three questions and tell him you answer to a higher arithmetic: fewer funerals, more diplomas, lower prices, open roads, shorter clinic lines. That is the Ethiopia we owe the next half-century. That is the only scoreboard that counts.